January 24, 2005

US Army Corps of Engineers
New Orleans District

Bonnet Carré Spillway

The Bonnet Carré Spillway protects the City of New Orleans from floods on the Mississippi River. Big timbers are pulled, as needed, along the 7,700-foot spillway to divert water to Lake Pontchartrain, almost 6 miles to the north.

Where. 32.8 miles upriver from New Orleans.

When operated. When flow exceeds 1.25 million cubic feet per second – AND is expected to remain above 1.25 million cfs for a significant period of time.

History. Construction illustrates abandonment of "levees only" flood control policy on the Mississippi. It was one of the big changes made in light of the Great Flood of 1927.

Diversion amounts. Project design, 250,000 cfs. Maximum flows have varied from 110,000 cfs in 1975 to 318,000 cfs in 1945.

Openings. Eight, beginning in 1937. Most recently, in Flood of 1997; stage in New Orleans was 16.9 feet.

Completed. 1931 for the spillway. 1932 for the east and west guide levees. 1936 for initial road and rail crossings.

Recreation value. More than 99 percent of the time, the spillway is not in flood. Recreation and economic visitors are estimated conservatively to exceed 250,000 per year.

Recreation activities. Boating, fishing, hunting, ATV and go-carts, water skiing, model-airplane flying, camping, picnicking, bike paths, nature trails.

Economic value. Sand mining is important to the low-lying New Orleans metro area. Each opening deposits millions of cubic yards in the 8,000-acre spillway.

Estimate that many construction sites and private-home yards have been raised with Bonnet Carre "river dirt." The sand is darkish in color, as smaller particles are usually mixed with the sand. The sand miners also benefited the government, by removing forebay sand before the crest expected Feb. 2, 2005, and sand on the protected side. It was not necessary to dredge or otherwise remove sand.

Environmental value: The spillway is host to beautiful swamps of Louisiana cypress, and many species of aquatic and terrestrial animals. In addition, high water short of opening the spillway provides diversion of fresh water into the Pontchartrain Basin, which suffers from saltwater intrusion. This occurs because river water flows through cracks between the timbers, as designed. Big river fish also come through the cracks, which can exceed 6 inches, and are scooped up in nets by local fishermen on the protected side.

2005 notes: The spillway road was closed by St. Charles Parish at 3 p.m., Wednesday, Jan. 19 because of leakage. Sand mining has been curtailed or ceased. ATV trails are closed until further notice.

High Water 2005. New page on New Orleans District Web site:
http://www.mvn.usace.army.mil/PAO/response/highwater2005.asp
Links include brand-new Bonnet Carré Spillway brochure and navigation bulletins. Or go to home page, www.mvn.usace.army.mil and click on the high-water squib at top of page.

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